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**MOBTOWN BEAT**

A Long Campaign

Sean Dobson Is Trying to Change The System, But For Now, All He Can Do Is Work It

by Edward Ericson Jr.

THE E-MAIL CAME LATE ON MARCH 18: Progressive Maryland, the left-leaning public policy lobby group, was getting word out that its "clean campaigns" bill was languishing in committee. Sean Dobson, Progressive Maryland's executive director, was pitching a dramatic story.

"There is a major campaign finance reform bill pending in the Maryland General Assembly right now that would, if enacted, benefit Baltimore City. And the key person in whether it passes is Baltimore's own Sen. Joan Carter Conway."

The bill, SB 593, appears to be the subject of some drama. Conway has long supported the bill, and Progressive Maryland has calculated that, if passed out of Conway's Education, Health and Environmental Affairs Committee, it will pass, for the first time, the full Maryland Senate.

If that happens, House Speaker Michael Busch is pledged to ram a companion bill through his legislative body as well. A similar bill passed the House of Delegates two years ago but died in the Senate. Last year the Senate version fell one vote short of passage. This year, the only remaining impediment is Conway, but she seems strangely reluctant to move it.

"We think [Senate President Thomas "Mike"] Miller is pounding on her behind closed doors," Dobson says. Miller did not return calls for comment by press time.

Conway says the bill is doomed, but she's not blaming Miller. "It's not popping out because it has a \$14.1 million fiscal note," she says, referring to the Maryland Department of Legislative Services' analysis of how much the new law would cost. "Even if it comes out [of my committee], it's going to Budget and Taxation [Committee], and they'll let it die."

As Conway sees it, Dobson may or may not have the votes needed to pass the bill on the floor. If he doesn't (and she allows that "President Miller doesn't necessarily like the bill"), then to bring it out of committee just to see it die year after year tends to weaken its chances. This year, she says, every bill with a fiscal note attached saying it would require new funding is being killed because the state has a budget deficit. Still, Conway says, "I have not decided. At the 11th hour I might take it to the floor and watch Budget and Tax snatch it again. But I don't want to keep killing the bill!"

The bill, titled Public Financing Act for Candidates of the General Assembly, would allow people to run for House or Senate seats without raising big money from rich donors, be they corporations or individuals. Similar to laws in place now in Maine and Arizona, the Maryland bill would require would-be candidates to raise small donations--\$5 each from 350 donors in their district--to prove their viability. After that, they would be entitled to tap into a public-campaign fund.

Maryland already has a public-funding system for gubernatorial campaigns, but it has only been used once, during the 1994 race, because candidates have chosen not to be bound by the spending limits in the public law--a bit more than \$2 million in 2006. (All together, incumbent Robert Ehrlich and his successful challenger, Martin O'Malley, burned through at least \$34 million, according to campaign-finance disclosure forms.)

The bill seeks to cap the financing at \$100,000 for a contested Senate race, and \$80,000 for a contested House race, both figures split evenly between the primary and general elections. But if an opponent outspent a candidate receiving public funds, the public funding would match that spending, up to double the spending limit.

The money for the fund would come from a \$5 voluntary checkoff on the state income tax form and from an abandoned-property fund, so taxpayers would not be forced to pay for political campaigns. A fiscal note on the bill puts the first-year cost of the program at \$14.1 million, with about \$9.2 million the next year.

Dobson's group has calculated that African-Americans, on average, give far less to state political campaigns than do whites. He says that means African-Americans' interests tend to get short shrift in the legislature, and places where African-Americans dominate--Prince George's County and Baltimore City, for instance--thereby are disadvantaged. He thinks his bill would level the playing field.

"This is a big reform bill," Dobson says. "This could really change politics in our state."

While waiting for Conway to "do the right thing," as he terms it, Dobson's group bought a full-page ad in the March 19 *Sun*, linking the BGE electric-rate increases to campaign finance. "The bill for ignoring campaign-finance reform just arrived," the ad's text reads.

Dobson calls power deregulation "the worst policy blunder in modern history." Maryland lawmakers passed it, he says, after collectively taking \$299,000 from the utilities. He says they've gotten \$1 million since, and an analysis published by Progressive Maryland claims that deregulation supporters got five times more power company campaign donations than deregulation opponents. "You and I are feeling it now," Dobson says. "Our electric bills are going to go up 800 bucks a year right now."

Time is running short, with the General Assembly session scheduled to end April 7. Dobson thinks the Senate bill will have to move this week if Busch is to have any time to get the House in order.

A Busch spokeswoman confirms the House speaker is ready and waiting. "He voted for it two years ago," Alexandra Hughes says. "The Senate needs to do something and send it to us."

The pressure now is all on Conway--from both sides. "Joan Carter Conway was a hero last year," Dobson says. "She pushed the bill out of committee and onto the floor despite Miller's opposition. We believe she's under a lot of pressure this year from Miller, and possibly special interests, to kill the bill, but we're confident that she'll do the right thing again, and move the bill out of committee, because she works for the voters of her district, and not for anybody else."